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UM'S FLANAGAN DESCRIBES DIGS AT POSSIBLE SITES OF SODOM AND GOMORRAH

By Maribeth Dwyer
Office of University Relations
University of Montana

MISSOULA--

Nineveh and Tyre, Peoria and Dubuque, Sodom and Gomorrah--place-names charged with imagery, each pair evoking mental pictures different from those called up by the others.

Consider Sodom and Gomorrah. These cities on the eastern coastal plain of the Dead Sea have been the subject of fire-and-brimstone sermons, Hollywood extravaganzas and scholarly investigation.

In the last category are excavations under way at Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira, towns which some researchers speculate could be the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah. The work at these Early Bronze Age (ca. 3000-2000 B.C.) sites in Jordan will enable researchers to reconstruct the culture of the time of Abraham; and it will shed light on Sodom and Gomorrah, two of the five cities of the plain mentioned in Genesis 14.

The archaeological research is co-sponsored by the Jordanian Department of Antiquities, the National Endowment for the Humanities, a number of colleges and universities, and other institutions.

As a sponsor of the dig at Bab edh-Dhra, the University of Montana was entitled to send faculty and students on the 1981 expedition to the site and to receive a share of the discoveries.

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Flanagan Describes--add one

According to Dr. James W. Flanagan, chairman of the UM Department of Religious Studies, "The University's involvement as a sponsor gave our students practical field experience and, more important, exposure to a culture other than their own. The artifacts the University will receive will be valuable for both instruction and public display."

Members of the UM religious studies faculty who worked at Bab edh-Dhra from May 20 through July 7 are Flanagan, a field director on the project; the Rev. Thomas Lee of the adjunct faculty; and Dr. David McCreery, a visiting assistant professor.

UM students who participated are James D. Clowes, Glasgow; Curtis G. Drake, Helena; and Martha J. Newby, Hinsdale, Ill. Their expenses were paid in part by Grant S. Moore Travel Scholarships, which were established by Dale G. Moore, a Missoula businessman, to honor his father, a retired Methodist minister. Both died in a plane crash in Idaho Nov. 22.

The UM faculty and students were among 75 members of the international team working at Bab edh-Dhra in 1981. The team was made up of students and professors from several academic disciplines, scientists and technicians, and laborers. They lived in a 12th-century Crusader castle at Kerak, 3,000 feet above sea level, and worked 15 miles away at Bab edh-Dhra, 900 feet below sea level in the Dead Sea valley.

"The castle at Kerak and one at Shobak are the farthest east and south of the Crusader castles, indicating that these points were the geographic limits reached by the Crusades to the Holy Land undertaken by Christians in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries, Flanagan said.

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Temperatures at the digging site sometimes reached 125 or 130 degrees Fahrenheit but usually were "a cool 110," Flanagan said. Members of the team arose at 2:30 a.m. for "early breakfast" so they could be at the site by 4 a.m. They worked until noon, with an intermission at 9 for "second breakfast." At 1 p.m. they had their big meal of the day, followed by a siesta until 3:30 or 4. Then came record-keeping and other camp chores. Dinner, a light meal, was at 7 and lights-out at 8. Saturday afternoons and Sundays were for recreation and travel.

Flanagan called the food "very good," a charitable assessment considering the monotony of the menus. "Early breakfast" always consisted of watery oatmeal or corn flakes, bread, jam, coffee or tea, and an orange. "Second breakfast," which also never varied, was a cucumber, a hard-boiled egg, cheese, pocket bread, and an orange. The main meal centered around a rice dish made with meat, often chicken or lamb, and included a salad of cucumber and tomato, a baked dessert, and an orange. The evening meal was soup, bread and cheese, and an orange.

They drank copious quantities of water--at least 14 glasses a day-- to prevent dehydration. Alcoholic beverages were discouraged, but perhaps the very conditions that dictated this prohibition--intense heat and heavy physical exertion--accounted for some for some workers having an occasional beer.

But not fatigue nor scorpion bites nor threat of sunstroke put a damper on the team's spirits. There was a great deal of conviviality, and every birthday was celebrated with festivities featuring ethnic dances and songs performed by team technicians, who were natives of the region.

The team members welcomed these diversions, but their main interest was in the dig.

The site was divided into sections called fields. Flanagan was director of Field XVI, which was at the north end of Bab edh-Dhra by the city wall, and Lee

Flanagan Describes--add three

was in his group. McCreery worked on the paleobiology of the project, and under his direction the UM students did all the seed flotation.

Nearly everything from the dig will yield information about the period under study. Paleobotanists can find out what crops were grown by analyzing the seeds found. Pollens give a clue to the climate. Pots and pieces of pottery can supply dates.

For example, according to Lee, "Pottery of a certain shape, color, composition and decoration is known to be from a certain period, so if you find a piece on the same level as a wall or a floor, you know that that architectural feature is of the same period."

Flanagan's group found what appears to be a large cultic installation, which was unexpected and, Flanagan thinks, unprecedented in the Early Bronze IV (EB IV) period in the southern Syro-Palestine and Transjordan area. The installation consisted of two buildings, one superimposed on the other, which apparently had been used for religious purposes.

Walter Rast and Thomas Schaub, co-directors of the expedition, describe installation in the January 1982 issue of the newsletter published by the American Schools of Oriental Research:

"The upper building was a circular one, in the center of which was a large slab resting on a base of boulders and smaller stones. Near this installation, excavation revealed a number of animal bones and horns of sheep or goats. Below this structure, an earlier one consisted of a finely plastered building with a doorway and plastered walls. In association with this building, the base of a well-made burnished incense burner came to light. This building is the first such religious-type structure to appear in Palestine belonging to this phase, thus it is of distinctive value."

Flanagan said that before this discovery it had been assumed that EB IV was a period of massive de-population and that a group of survivors existed on

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the fringe of larger but destroyed cities. "However," he pointed out, "this installation indicates a public architecture and, therefore, a developed social organization. We also found gold jewelry, a sign of a stratified society."

Among their finds were two cylinder seals about two inches long and as big around as a man's thumb. These seals, which make impressions when rolled over wax or clay, were probably worn around the neck. They both bore geometric designs somewhat like those on seals from the EB IV excavations at Ebla in Syria, and a stick figure of a man was etched on one of them. Unlike in Syria, however, no texts were found at Bab edh-Dhra.

Over the next four years, materials from the excavations at Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira will be analyzed by specialists at many universities and other institutions, Flanagan said. "We stand to learn a great deal about the history of the region, settlement patterns, diet, agriculture, diseases, life expectancy, sex ratios, infant mortality, architecture, and chronology of occupation."

They may even learn that Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira are the very settings of the biblical stories of Sodom and Gomorrah--though, with a scholar's skepticism, Flanagan will go no further at this point than to concede that they are probably in the same region.

But he has no trouble agreeing with Crown Prince Hassan's description of Jordan as a country "where the mandates of heaven and history coincide."

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